

Restructuring the 8th Century Landscape: Planned Settlements, Estates and Minsters in pre-Viking England

Duncan Wright

Although current scholarship has developed a convincing model for the structure and functioning of Middle Saxon estates, little is known of how elite lordship influenced the wider settlement landscape in this pre-Viking period. Archaeological investigation within currently occupied villages, however, is providing crucial evidence of settlement in areas located away from estate centres and their agricultural cores. This paper reviews two excavations that have identified Middle Saxon settlements within the environs of modern villages in Cambridgeshire. These stable and structured communities, which utilised a mixed farming economy, represent a vital contribution to our understanding of the early medieval countryside. It is argued that settlement planning was a common feature of pre-Viking rural settlements, probably first initiated by ecclesiastical communities. It appears that the move towards more stable settlement foci and a structured agricultural landscape was motivated by newly permanent monastic groups before the breakdown of large 'multiple' estates. These changes, it is asserted, laid the foundations of what were to eventually emerge as nucleated medieval villages.

Introduction

Since the publication of Glanville Jones' (1979) seminal paper on 'multiple estates', scholars have invested substantial amounts of time and ink on elucidating the character of landscape exploitation in the pre-Viking period (e.g. Aston 1985; Faith 1997; Blair 2005). That high-status Middle Saxon communities organised their landscapes as an estate centre surrounded by a network of specialised dependent settlements is largely accepted by scholars, despite the questionable validity of the use of later documents to reconstruct earlier estates (eg Bassett 1989; Muir 2001). Perhaps the most conspicuous indication of these acutely managed agricultural regimes is the preservation of the names of settlements once tied to high-status centres such as Shipton rendering sheep and Buttermere, cheese (Hallam 1988). The naming of communities after a particular agricultural or natural resource has been

viewed as evidence for specialisation, the yield of which would have been rendered to the estate centre, from which it was either utilised or the surplus sold for profit (Fleming 2011, 18). Within this overarching model it has proven difficult to distinguish between estates operated under royal control and those associated with ecclesiastical establishments; it has even been suggested that no such distinction ever existed on the ground. Although 'multiple' or 'great' estates are likely to have originated under royal ownership, their territories are likely to have been coterminous with the *parochiae* of 7th- and 8th-century minster churches that some have asserted were founded on royal vills (Hooke 1998, 70).

In a key summary of high-status residences in early medieval England, Peter Sawyer (1983, 281–2) noted the consistency with which royal *tuns* were associated with churches and endowments. It has also been highlighted that Bede used the terms *villae* and *vici* to denote both centres of royal ownership and those

owned by ecclesiastical communities (Campbell 1979, 44). Whilst it is thus difficult to discern between elite activity, it is probable that ecclesiastical settlements were more permanent than their secular counterparts in the pre c850 period. An equally significant challenge to our understanding of pre-Viking estate structure is the relative lack of material regarding settlements that were not estate centres. While most scholars therefore accept that 'landscapes of obligation' were developed in order to meet the various needs of non-producing elite communities by at least the beginning of the 9th century (Faith 1997, 10), our picture of how the settlement hierarchy and their linkages were manifested remains largely unclear. Using the county of Cambridgeshire as a case study, this paper illustrates the way in which archaeological evidence can reveal the settlement sequence that saw newly permanent communities develop during the pre-Viking period.

Early Medieval Cambridgeshire

From the final quarter of the 9th century until 917, the area that was to become the historic county of Cambridgeshire was incorporated in the zone of Scandinavian administration now known as the Danelaw. Some measure of the impact of this activity is tangible in the historical material, with the recorded sacking of religious institutions, such as *Icanho*, and the total destruction of several other houses. These peaks of violence aside, it is difficult to assess the degree of disruption to elite activity caused by the Scandinavian influx. Indeed, it has been convincingly argued that what the Viking invasions provided was something of a *coup de grace*, at least to ecclesiastical organisations, many of which had been in decline from the beginning of the 9th century (Whitelock 1979, 192; Hadley 1996, 16). Such processes in areas like Cambridgeshire resulted in a dearth of surviving written evidence with which elite religious and secular communities may be characterised (Rumble 1981). As such records provide the fundamental material for historical reconstructions of the administrative and settlement landscapes of Middle Saxon estates (e.g. Bassett 1992), research into the character of pre-Viking Cambridgeshire is thus restricted.

This lack of written documentation has encouraged scholars working in the region to employ different techniques to reconstruct estate networks before c875. In a study of significant ingenuity, Susan Oosthuizen (2001) attempted to map the network of minsters and

estates in south Cambridgeshire utilising a disparate group of sources, including topographical setting, archaeological material and church dedications. Although the nature of the evidence prevented the development of a totally coherent picture, Oosthuizen's key deduction was the probable universality of administrative frameworks assumed by minsters across southern England, including her study area south of the River Great Ouse in Cambridgeshire (Oosthuizen 2001, 58). There is little doubt, however, that this research pushed the available evidence to its limits: establishing the character of the estate framework and its dependent settlements anywhere in Cambridgeshire remains a largely speculative exercise. These difficulties are symptomatic of a more significant problem that impairs understanding of Middle Saxon landscape organisation in England generally: namely, that although the model for pre-Viking estates is reasonably well established, little is known of how secular and ecclesiastical lordship influenced the settlements, and thus their constituents' lived experiences, within the wider landscape (Blair 2005, 255).

If relatively little is known about the dependent settlement networks of pre-Viking estates in Cambridgeshire, research has been far more successful in detailing the nature of estate centres and the makeup of their immediate settlement structure. At Higham Ferrers in Northamptonshire for instance, a large stock-pen likely representing a tribute centre has been excavated. The tribute centre was attached to the estate centre of Irthlingborough located a short distance across the River Nene, from which early medieval activity has also been noted (Hardy et al 2007). The landscape immediately surrounding such centres is likely to have comprised a core zone of fertile land, commonly known as an *inland* (Dyer 2002, 27). In Cambridgeshire, recent excavation at West Fen Road on the outskirts of Ely has identified what appears to be a settlement located on the *inland* of the monastic community located approximately 1km to the east (Mortimer et al 2005). First occupied in the 8th century, the settlement at West Fen Road was arranged around a linear street plan, and experienced continuous occupation until its eventual desertion in the 15th century. The lack of handmade pottery and a single *sceatta* find dated c730–40 makes a mid-8th century date most likely, when a deliberate laying-out of an extensive settlement appears to have first occurred. The system of enclosures and structures on a linear arrangement excavated at West Fen Road crucially indicates a highly ordered and regulated settlement,

apparently planned from its inception (Mortimer et al 2005, 25–32). Little evidence was recovered from West Fen Road to indicate a high status population, however. The prosaic nature of the environmental and artefactual evidence is particularly significant, as it suggests that the settlement was occupied by peasants tasked with producing surpluses of meat, grain, dairy products and textiles for consumption or resale by the ecclesiastical population (Mortimer et al 2005, 144–8).

The development of settlements within the *inlands* of high-status centres such as Ely indicates the kind of obligations placed upon the resources and infrastructure of the agricultural landscape by elite Middle Saxon communities. The excavation at West Fen Road provides a rare glimpse into the character of a settlement on a pre-Viking monastic *inland*, yet our understanding of how elite lordship influenced the *wider* settlement landscape of the Cambridgeshire region remains poor. The proliferation of charters dated to around 675 from other regions of England testifies to the huge endowments of land granted to the church by the secular elite, a symptom of a widespread economic intensification which effected fundamental change in the social and cultural experiences of early medieval communities (Hansen and Wickham 2000; Maddicot 2005). It is likely that conditions were comparable in Cambridgeshire (Oosthuizen 2001), but the shortage of written documents, coupled with the lack of reliable dating evidence for the formation of place-names (Fleming 2000, 18), means that it is the archaeological material that offers the greatest potential for enhancing current perceptions. Utilising the largely neglected archaeological data from excavations within currently occupied rural villages, this article demonstrates how powerful elite institutions instigated fundamental change to the character of the Cambridgeshire countryside by introducing elements of planning to rural settlements. The introduction of regulated and ordered settlement planning represents a marked shift in the perception of land and property during the early medieval period and suggests a greater degree of management and social control, marking a key step towards a more stable settlement landscape that would lead to the creation of nucleated villages in many parts of England.

Planning and Settlements

The Archaeological Investigations Project (WS1) records that of the forty-four excavations undertaken

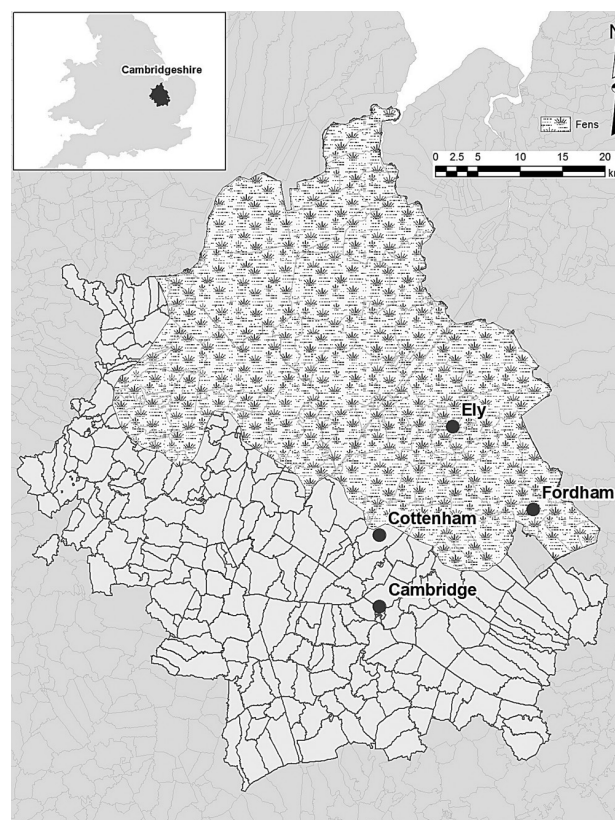


Fig 1
Location of sites mentioned in the text. Cambridge, Ely and the extent of the fens are also illustrated for reference.

within occupied villages in Cambridgeshire, seventeen recovered evidence that could be confidently attributed a Middle Saxon origin (c650–850). These results stand in stark contrast to work such as that undertaken by Carenza Lewis and members of the Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA) scheme, whose investigations in ten Cambridgeshire villages to date has produced little material of Early to Middle Saxon date (c450–850; Lewis 2010). The absence of Early and Middle Saxon settlement remains from the test pits dug by the HEFA scheme supports the prevailing academic view that the village landscape of Eastern England was formed between the 9th and 12th centuries. Most scholars maintain that the transient and ephemeral settlements of the 6th and 7th centuries such as Mucking, Essex (Hamerow 1993), and West Stow, Suffolk (West 1985), persisted until the Late Saxon period, when the process of village nucleation began in midland England, as discussed below.

In addition to the research value of finds recorded by the Archaeological Investigations Project, the potential of excavations within still-occupied villages can be seen by reviewing the evidence

Fig 2
A modern map of Cottenham with the location of archaeological interventions mentioned in the text. Edited by the author from an Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service.

from archaeological intervention at two sites in Cambridgeshire: Cottenham and Fordham. Cottenham is situated on the watershed between the rivers Cam and Great Ouse, and is among a cluster of medieval settlements sited on slightly elevated land on the southern fen-edge. Fordham is located on a low rise of higher ground within the fenland of south-eastern Cambridgeshire (Fig 1). Although these settlements are only situated at around 5m–10m OD, this slight topographical rise has proved crucial in shaping the nature of past human activity in the region. Islands of slightly elevated ground, both within the fen and along its margins, have consistently produced evidence of human activity, being a focus for hunting for Prehistoric peoples and of substantial agricultural potential for Romano-British communities (Hall 1996). Crucial for this study, though, are the results of excavations within the historic cores of Cottenham and Fordham.

These have revealed a focus of activity dated to the 7th and 8th centuries, with the settlement sequences at both sites characterised by permanent habitation and apparent planning.

Cottenham

The results of the excavations at Cottenham have been comprehensively presented by Richard Mortimer (2000), thus only a brief overview is required here. Situated within the watershed between the River Great Ouse and River Cam, Cottenham is thought to have been one of the largest villages in Cambridgeshire since at least the 11th century. It is sited approximately 9km to the north of Cambridge, and liable to flooding due to its fen-edge location. The current settlement has an elongated core, extending over 1.5km along a crooked main road, High Street, which is believed to have gained its current form by the late 13th century.

Fig 3

Phase II features at Lordship Lane, Cottenham. Dated to the 8th century, this phase is characterised by the development of a radial toft pattern in the southern part of the site, with single structures in each property plot. Reproduced with kind permission of Richard Mortimer and CAU (2011).

Ravensdale (1974) has suggested that the route follows the western and northern boundaries of Cottenham's earliest settlement, but this hypothesis was not supported by a Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) excavation at the junction of High Street and Telegraph Street in 1997 (Alexander 1997), which recovered no evidence of activity prior to the 12th century. Despite the identification of some Late Saxon features, a series

of ditches excavated to the south of Denmark Road in 1996 were also overwhelmingly dated to the later medieval period (Heawood 1997; Fig 2).

Initial archaeological mitigation projects in Cottenham thus produced material relating almost exclusively to the 10th century and later, detailing a sequence of village development regarded by many scholars as typical for Cambridgeshire and England

(eg Lewis 2010). This model was to be significantly revised, however, following the excavation of land at Lordship Lane (Mortimer 1998 and 2000). Located immediately northwest of the village centre and alongside the Scheduled Monument of Crowlands Moat, a site extending over two hectares was excavated by CAU in advance of housing development. Previous evaluation trenches had demonstrated the presence of early medieval activity, but the complexity and extent of archaeological features revealed was far more significant than anticipated. Five main phases of development were identified on the site, with an Early-Middle Saxon settlement enclosure characterising the designated Phase I. The extent of the enclosure, which demarcated the primary area of occupation, was identified to the north, west and south with a maximum known diameter of 170m from west to east. The absence of Ipswich Ware coupled with the presence of grass and flint tempered wares from Phase I led the excavators to attribute an approximate 7th century date to this initial settlement sequence (Mortimer 2000, 7).

Phase II of the occupation at Lordship Lane was marked by a shift to a radial nucleated settlement pattern, constituted by the establishment of what appear to be at least four toft boundaries. The presence of small quantities of Ipswich Ware suggested a date no later than the late 8th or early 9th century for the new arrangement, the use of which persisted into the 11th century. The four enclosures shared an ambiguous focus point south of the excavated area (Mortimer 2000, 5–7; Fig 3), and retained this form throughout subsequent phases. The possibility of a church being this focus is supported by the field name ‘Church Hill’, located immediately north-west of the moated manor recorded on historic maps, as well as by a local folk tale that details the desire of the villagers to build a church in the area. Both Ravensdale (1974, 123) and Mortimer (2000, 20) have suggested that the folk tale actually records the site of an earlier church, but more convincing evidence is provided by the Ordnance Survey First Edition for Cottenham, which notes the recovery of human remains to the south-east of the moated site in 1872. Taken with the Church Hill field name, the identification of human remains in the immediate vicinity of the Lordship Lane site certainly suggests the existence of an earlier church or churchyard, although its origins and development are at present unknown.

The most significant outcome of the Lordship Lane excavations was no doubt the identification of the radial toft pattern (Fig 4), and evidence for a date as

early as the 8th century. The development of permanent tenurial divisions certainly represents a considerable departure from the transient hamlet-style settlements that are thought to have persisted in the 8th-century rural landscape of England (e.g. Lewis et al 1997). Caution should be encouraged when attempting to directly associate the Phase II sequence at Cottenham with the later medieval village, however. Whilst it is likely that Cottenham developed as a central place on the fen-edge during the 8th century, perhaps even the 7th, it is difficult to explicitly associate the remains of the Lordship Lane site with the later village structure. It is crucial to note that the occupation sequence at Lordship Lane was abandoned in the 11th century and thus is unlikely to have articulated the form of the subsequent nucleated settlement. Rather, the early medieval settlement archaeology of Cottenham may demonstrate a ‘two-stage’ process of village formation: a process also identified through excavations at Fordham.

Fordham

The present village of Fordham is located alongside the River Snail on the south-eastern fen edge, situated to take advantage of the episodic rise and fall in the local water table. A series of development-led archaeological investigations in Fordham have uncovered substantial material indicating Middle Saxon occupation. The most significant intervention undertaken in the village to date was the excavation of one hectare of land at Hillside Meadow in 1998 by Birmingham University Archaeological Field Unit (Mould 1999; Patrick and Rátkai 2011). Investigation revealed four distinct phases of activity spanning the 6th century to the post-medieval period. Phase I, dated c500–700/750, was characterised by a large, roughly rectangular enclosure to the west of the site, a more regular enclosure to the south-east of the site, and a ditched droveway running north-south which led into the largest enclosure. Remarkably, the droveway appears to have been respected by property boundaries shown on the Ordnance Survey First Edition map, suggesting that the feature articulated the form of the medieval and later village. Three, possibly four, sunken-featured buildings and a sequence of pits were also attributable to this earliest period, but the intensity of their use did not appear to continue into subsequent phases (Patrick and Rátkai 2011, 102–3).

During the second phase, dated by ceramics to c700/750–850, the largest enclosure was re-cut but

the shape of the site was profoundly changed by the construction of an east-west ditch. This ditch formed the basis for a sub-divided enclosure appended to it from north to south, creating an orderly system interpreted by the excavators as denoting ‘*an overhaul of agricultural practice*’ (Patrick and Rátkai 2011, 105; Fig 5). From the mid-9th century to the 12th century – Phase III of the occupation sequence – three earlier enclosures continued in use, and a further four enclosure features were cut within the eastern half of the site, suggesting that the settlement was ‘drifting’ towards the church and historic core of the village (Mould 1999, 4). Perhaps the most enigmatic finding of the excavation, though, was the burial of four individuals in a ditch to the east of the largest

enclosure. The burials were located in a stretch of the Phase I driveway ditch, towards the centre of the excavated site, although there was unfortunately insubstantial dating evidence associated with them (Mould 1999, 3-4; Patrick and Rátkai 2011, 106).

The system of enclosures traceable from the earliest phase of occupation at the Hillside Meadow settlement demonstrates a remarkable degree of internal organisation. It is difficult to determine the relationship between the enclosures and the later street orientation and tenement arrangements with precision, due to the ‘backfield’ location of the Hillside Meadow site. It seems most probable, though, that it paralleled the developments at Cottenham: the site’s occupation drifted a short distance from the Middle Saxon focus to

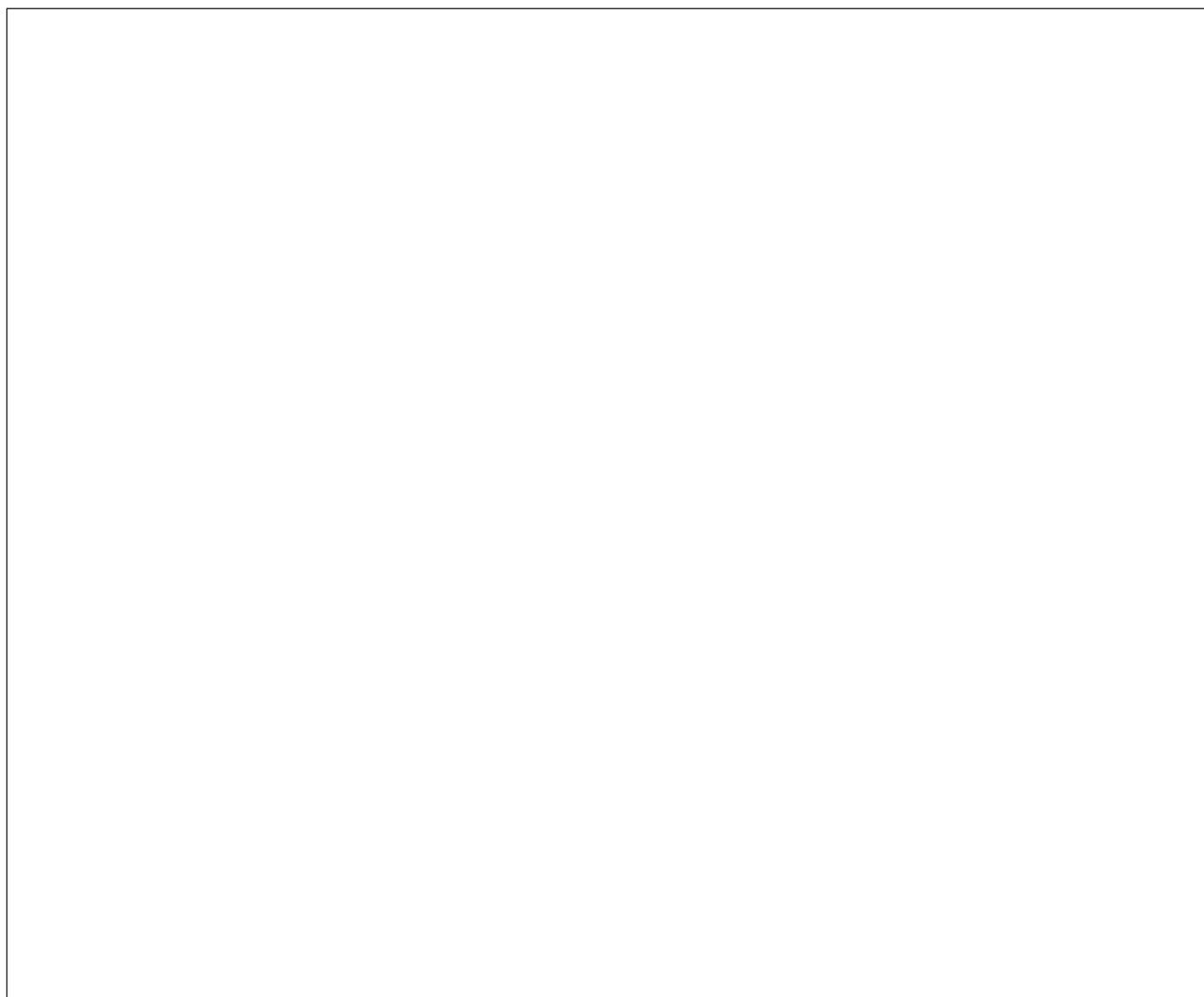


Fig 4
Mortimer’s (2001) reconstruction of how the early medieval toft arrangement at the Lordship Lane site may have looked. The pond forms an apparent focus for the radial plots, but the potential presence of an early church should also not be discounted. Reproduced with kind permission of Richard Mortimer and CAU (2011).

form the current street pattern during the 10th or 11th century, though significant features such as droveways were fossilised and reflected in the eventual pattern of medieval tenement plots (Patrick and Rátkai 2011, 106). Other archaeological evaluation trenches in the village have demonstrated widespread evidence for early medieval occupation, which certainly supports the suggestion for a marked chronological shift in settlement focus, rather than the wide range indicating an exceptionally extensive area of simultaneous habitation (Connor 2001; O'Brien and Gardner 2002; Sutherland and Wotherspoon 2002).

Minsters, Settlement and Society

The settlement character of the pre-Viking phases at Cottenham and Fordham contravene the transient and ephemeral settlement types perceived as typifying the period; their stable and regulated occupation suggests a significantly different organisational structure to the dispersed communities hitherto taken to persist into the mid-9th century and beyond (cf Taylor 1983; Lewis et al 1997). The introduction of bounded space, including the presence of likely tenurial components, indicates a change in the working life of the settlements and the experience of their inhabitants. One of the underlying dynamics behind such transformations is likely to have been the developing agricultural economy, which progressed from near-subsistence level to one orientated towards surplus production. This broad chronology is not to refute the possible creation of surplus prior to the 8th century, however; the vast investments of wealth evident in finds such as the treasure from Sutton Hoo mound I burial and the Staffordshire Hoard are testament to a more sophisticated economic framework than is usually acknowledged. The phenomenon of planned settlements, too, cannot be claimed as an innovation of the 8th century, as the deliberate orientation of structures is recognisable at sites such as Yeavinger, Northumbria, and Cowdery's Down, Hampshire (Blair 2005, 54–7; Hamerow 2005, 278). From the 7th century, however, the character of elite communities can be seen to change, as the peripatetic entourages that characterised early lordship came to be replaced by permanent centres of consumption. Rather than intermittently having to provide farmed surplus for an itinerant lord, rural communities from the 7th century were obligated to produce continuously for fixed, non-producing, high-status groups. Continued transformation within the structure of elite society

Fig 5
The rectangular arrangement of enclosures identified at Hillside Meadow, Fordham (Patrick and Ratkai 2011). The repeated reinstatement of enclosures that continued as late as the 11th century is indicative of a highly organised community with recognised perceptions of property ownership and space. Reproduced with kind permission of Birmingham Archaeology.

thus instigated fundamental change across the rural landscape, not only in the development of core agricultural *inlands*, but also in the wider settlement network, as is evidenced by Cottenham and Fordham.

John Blair (1996, 120–1) has convincingly argued that whilst it cannot be proven that high-status secular sites were monumental or permanent before the 10th century, it appears that stable settlements were a key component of pre-Viking ecclesiastical establishments. More specifically, Charles Doherty has asserted that minsters represent the earliest centres of permanently situated consumption, stating that the 7th- and 8th-century church was the '*only organisation that could produce a surplus, particularly of grain*' (Doherty 1985, 55). The capacity to create such yields may have been due to the presence of monastic brethren with a semi-dependant status, whose ability to exploit the land more directly emancipated them from the

process of tribute accumulation which typified secular landownership up to c800 (Blair 2005, 255; Fleming 2011, 22). Together with their permanent character, it may be that high-status ecclesiastical sites during this early period were also subject to planning using a standardised measure: a trend so far revealed by the regular planning of 7th-century Kentish churches, the arrangement of property boundaries at *Hamwic*, and at rural settlement sites such as West Fen Road, Ely (Blair 2011, pers comm). Whilst neither Cottenham nor Fordham present evidence of the use of standardised measurements, it seems that the intention of settlement planning was transferred to the rural communities of 8th-century Cambridgeshire.

Further evidence of an ecclesiastical hand behind the management of pre-Viking Cottenham can be found in the recorded ownership of land by the minsters of Ely and Crowland in Domesday Book (Darby 2007), although the influence of Ely is perhaps more convincingly indicated by a reference in the *Liber Eliensis*, a history of Ely Abbey written during the 12th century. The *Eliensis* states that an individual named Uvi or Uva granted land there to the Convent of Ely in the middle of the 10th century (*Liber Eliensis* Book II/84; Keynes 2003, 5-9). The grant recorded in the *Eliensis* may in fact be a forgery: an attempt to provide written integrity to a more antiquated claim to Cottenham and its lands. This was an approach adopted by the authors of many Anglo-Saxon charter declarations (Yorke 1995, 54-7).

Monastic parallels may also be found for the radial arrangement of tofts at Cottenham by their comparison with the organisation of the religious community at Whithorn, Galloway, from at least the 8th century (Hill 1996, 26). Enclosures and tenorial boundaries were not entirely the preserve of religious establishments during the pre-Viking period, however, and from as early as the 6th century boundaries begin to emerge on a range of domestic sites across England, reflecting a greater ordering and regulation of communities and the social space of individuals (Reynolds 2003, 130). Nevertheless, it is likely that stable communities attached to the early Church placed unique demands on the agricultural economy, encouraging the development of more static occupation both at estate centres and their dependent settlements. These conditions are perhaps demonstrated by the historical sources relating to Cottenham that, although requiring back-projection, hint at more antiquated ecclesiastical associations.

Whilst reconstructing the agency behind the development of pre-Viking settlements remains difficult,

it is likely that minster communities were central to the increased articulation of the landscape during the Middle Saxon period. The stratification of settlement around the 8th century contributes to the growing body of evidence that forwards settlement nucleation as a two-stage process, commencing from the Middle Saxon period. This hypothesis, first forcefully advocated by Brown and Foard (1998), stands in stark contrast to the long-held prevailing view that the village landscape of England was created between the 9th and 12th centuries (Taylor 1983; Lewis et al 1997; Dyer 2002). Apparent support for this established 'village moment' model is provided by the results of fieldwalking surveys in counties such as Northamptonshire, which have identified dispersed farmsteads associated with Early to Middle Saxon pottery in the landscapes surrounding historic village centres (Foard 1978; Hall and Martin 1979; Shaw 1993/4). The lack of Late Saxon ceramics on the same sites, together with the cessation of Early to Middle Saxon pottery production c850 (Blinkhorn 1999), has generally been viewed as indicating a mid-9th century date for the first shift towards nucleated settlements that subsequently developed into recognisable medieval villages. The recovery of Late Saxon habitation deposits from numerous villages (Lewis 2010) also ostensibly supports this sequence. Scholars have agreed that this structuring of the landscape occurred within the reorganisation of landed estates, as the preceding 'multiple estates' were fragmented and the manorialisation process begun (Rippon 2008, 251). Yet there is now a significant body of data, including the excavated evidence presented here, that stands in contradiction to this established explanatory framework.

It now seems that in many cases, villages were created through a two-phase process; following primary nucleation around a single focus at some point before the 9th century, the characteristic elements of medieval villages emerged following settlement and common field re-planning from the 10th century (Rippon 2008, 260). This sequence has been identified within modern settlements such as Raunds (Parry 2006) and Daventry (Soden 1996/7), both in Northamptonshire. In Cambridgeshire, Chris Taylor has shown that large oval basins of meadow land acted as foci settlements before the creation of nucleated villages (Taylor 2002). Looking beyond the East Midlands, to Gloucestershire, evidence for a Middle Saxon 'nucleation' phase has been identified during several excavations at Lechlade (Bateman et al 2003; Reynolds 2006). At Yarnton in Oxfordshire, settlement shift continued until the 11th

century, yet the development of village characteristics such as toft-like plots began in the Middle Saxon period. The developments at Yarnton were associated with significant transformation of the agricultural economy of the site, including the intensive cultivation of hay meadow which would have required controlled reclamation of the Thames floodplain. Crucially, the changes in the economic and structural makeup of the community coincided with the establishment of the minster at nearby Eynsham, and Yarnton's probable integration into the documented monastic estate of *Iogneshomme* (Blair 2000, 1–2; Hey 2004, 90–5). It is likely, therefore, that at Yarnton we see the imposition of a more rigorous spatial arrangement upon an existing settlement, in the introduction of toft plots, initiated by the minster community at Eynsham.

An insight into the type of agricultural regimes operated by these early monastic dependencies in Cambridgeshire has been achieved by Susan Oosthuizen's (2006) study of the Bourn Valley, which challenged the assumption that common field and nucleated village formation were coterminous. Recognising the development of 'proto-common fields' in the 8th and 9th centuries, Oosthuizen identified a type of agricultural unit that may have been utilised by Middle Saxon communities at Cottenham and Fordham as well. The Middle Saxon phases of the two Cambridgeshire villages therefore contribute to a developing body of evidence that forwards an explanatory model that dates the stratification of the settlement landscape of Eastern England to around the 8th century. This chronology challenges the association of village nucleation with the beginnings of manorialisation, as agricultural intensification and crop diversification began before the breaking apart of extensive or 'multiple' estates (Fleming 2011, 30). It seems that the emergence of organised and permanent rural communities, so often viewed as the product of thegnly design, began before the rise of the newly powerful elite of the Late Saxon period. Instead, it was the unique obligations of ecclesiastical groups, featuring stable, non-producing populations, that can be more convincingly associated with the radical transformation of the English countryside in the pre-Viking period.

Conclusion

The archaeological material from the two Cambridgeshire villages outlined in this article contributes to a growing body of evidence that the restructuring of the agricultural landscape of England occurred during the 8th century. The implementation of deliberate planning in the rural settlements of Cottenham and Fordham challenges the prevailing view that the reordering of the landscape took place later, as large Middle Saxon estates became fragmented. Certainly, these changes intensified during the Late Saxon period; proprietors of new, small-scale estates likely encouraged such processes as the benefits of greater farming yields and more tightly controlled communities became evident. However, it was forces other than secular lordship that instigated the development of the settlement regime in the 8th century. Likely central to these changes was the increasingly stable character of ecclesiastical groups, as previously itinerant lordship yielded to permanent, high-status minsters who placed new obligations on rural communities. Providing a year-round farming surplus, possibly specialised towards a particular resource, required a new approach to settlement organisation. Individuals newly involved in this perpetual agricultural work began to use enclosure to define their property, as the importance of private land ownership became more entrenched. Developing social and settlement structures thus transformed the landscape, as the ephemeral and transient groups that had previously characterised the countryside were replaced by fixed communities, who set the scene for the eventual establishment of nucleated villages in many parts of central England.

Duncan Wright is a PhD candidate at the University of Exeter. His research interests include Middle Saxon landscape archaeology and the positioning of smiths within early medieval settlements.

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